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ABSTRACT

Asserting that little is known about women's leadership development and style, this paper suggests reasons for this lack of knowledge and presents a literature search on the topic of women and leadership. When Vermont elected a woman as governor (Kunin, 1984), she appointed a large number of women to positions of power and influence within the state. This paper reports on a research study, conducted with 24 of these women, including the governor, in order to determine their leadership development and style. The results indicated that there is no single pathway to leadership positions and that women's career paths are non-linear, contextual, and interwoven with personal concerns. The results are described in terms of: (1) individual characteristics; (2) societal forces; (3) relationships to parents; (4) education; (5) marriage; (6) career aspirations; and (7) leadership styles. The paper concludes that educators should consider gender differences in relationship to leadership training, encourage women to take risks and try new ideas, teach about the value of women's contributions, and encourage the balancing of the needs for autonomy and connections. (JHP)

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A PROFILE OF SELECTED WOMEN LEADERS: TOWARD A NEW MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

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A Profile of Selected Women Leaders: Toward a New Model of Leadership

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Abstract: Twenty-four women leaders in Vermont state government were interviewed with respect to leadership development and style. Data suggest that women's pathways to leadership are more likely to be non-linear, in contrast to men, and that their leadership styles are contextual and connected, offering evidence of a more "feminine" decision making model.

Introduction

Little is known of women's leadership development and style. Hennig and Jardim (1976) in a study of women corporate leaders offered support that their success might lie within the family dynamics. All were first born, of upwardly mobile professionals, well-educated families, with an especially close relationship with a father who had actively encouraged them to follow non-traditional gender paths. However, with this exception, it is difficult to find research on women in policy making positions, and with good reason, since few women leaders have emerged in this country. For example, in the U.S. Congress only 5% of its members are women. And, despite the fact that over one-half of all women are in the workforce (Rix 1987), a very small percentage sit in board rooms, preside as heads of corporations or presidents of institutions of higher learning. Thus, it is understandable that previous leadership literature has been based primarily on a male model where achievement has been equated with control, command, autonomy, performance (McClelland & Steele,1973; Burns,1978), rather than a process in which leaders encourage and empower others to fulfill both individual and community needs.

Some have attributed this paucity of women leaders to internal factors, others to external influences. For example, Burns (1978) believed sex role stereotyping of women as dependent, passive, non-assertive, and weak, all qualities not conducive to leadership, was a major obstacle. Horner (1972) suggested that women feared success, postulating that achievement placed women in a double bind in which success became equated with a loss of femininity. Although today this research is considered limited, it did open up for legitimate inspection the question of women and achievement.

Other researchers (Kaufman & Richardson,1972; Riger & Galligan, 1980) have speculated that the reason for the lack of female leaders may be external and structural. They assert that women's rise to leadership positions has been hampered by male dominance at top levels and the existence of an "old boys' network" in which younger men are encouraged and mentored by elder superiors. Without a cadre of like women to mentor younger compatriots women's ability to access power and exert influence in various institutions may be diminished.

Yet, even when women exert leadership qualities their behavior is often overlooked, or differentially interpreted (Porter, Geis, & Jennings, 1983). In fact, when women are successful the primary motivation has been attributed to affiliation needs; that they achieve in order to please someone else (Kaufman & Richardson,1982). To add to the dilemna, recent researchers (Belenky, Goldberger & Tarule,1987; Gilligan, 1982; Pearson, 1986) point out that women may differ in their ways of knowing, perceiving and responding, reflecting different socialization patterns which consequently may become transformed into a different style of leadership. Does this suggest that we

may need to re-think the traditional models and pathways of leadership?

The opportunity to test this question and to examine leadership in women emerged when in Vermont a woman was elected Governor (Kunin,1984) who subsequently appointed a sizable number of women to positions of influence and power in state government. In fact, almost half of the top administrative positions in Vermont were now being held by women. With the onset of a "critical mass" of women leaders a "golden moment" appeared to study women's leadership with respect to pathways to leadership as well as leadership style.

Method

Subjects: Twenty-four women in top administrative positions in Vermont state government were contacted and asked to be a part of a survey of women's leadership development. All agreed to do so. The interviews, using a qualitative case study method, were conducted during the spring of 1987. The subject pool included the Governor, three Secretaries of super-agencies, and the remainder Commissioners, Deputies, Division heads, or Board members of Governor's Commission on Women. All were in policy making positions, and for the most part headed multi-million dollar operations.

Interview protocol: The interviews consisted of approximately one and one-half hours, in which the subjects were asked to "tell in your own words hou you came to be where you are today; what significant events, people, experiences have helped to shape who you are today; what opportunities/barriers you perceived along the way." Extensive probing was given to elicit information about the early family and socialization experiences, role of education, mentors, career paths, intimate relationships, perception of work, the balancing act, leadership style, implications for women.

Data was then analysed by content anlysis, looking for emerging themes with respect to leadership development and style. The data are rich and engrossing; the present paper is but a small part of the richness of these women's lives. This paper will examine their family dynamics and their leadership style with particular comparison to the Hennig and Jardim sample.

Results

The major findings of this study is that there is no one pathway to leadership; that, in fact, women's career paths are non-linear, contextual, and interwoven with personal concerns. Leadership styles, in turn, reflect this process of relatedness, being more contextual and connected, offering evidence of a more "feminine" decision making process.

Leadership contingency schedules for these women indicate both individual characteristics such as native intelligence, ambition, perseverance, and flexibility, and social forces such as the family setting, which, although diverse, and often filled with struggle, nevertheless provided encouragement and opportunities to try out non-traditional forms of behavior. Later, with societal forces exerting pressures to conform to the stereotypic role, they incorporated both feminine and masculine approved behaviors, still maintaining a firm sense of self and an internal sense of control.

Specifically, the following profile emerged. Average age of the sample was forty-three. Four women were in their 50's (including the Governor), thirteen in their 40's, and seven in their 30's with the most prestigious positions being held by women in their 40's and 50's. Hennig and Jardim's (1976) sample were on the average older. Eleven (46%) were oldest or only, six (25%) middle, and seven (29%) youngest. Thus, 75% of the sample were either oldest, only or youngest children, consistent with previous research on the high achiever (Hennig & Jardim 1976). In terms of socioeconomic status the largest group were from working blue-collar or lower middle class families whose parents had not gone to college. In fact, only 21% of the sample were from the upper or professional class in contrast to previous research (Hennig & Jardim 1976). Diversity was seen in family composition with several women being reared by a single parent or a relative. The traditional nuclear family in which father worked and mother was a homemaker accounted for but 50% of the sample with the other 50% having a non-traditional family, ranging from intact families where both parents worked to being reared by a single parent or by relatives. Thus, this sample represented much greater diversity in family composition than did Hennig and Jardim (1976).

With respect to relationship to parents, the overwhelming majority recollected that in childhood they were closer to their fathers, that they had been encouraged by fathers or male siblings to be non-traditional in activities and interests. However, many mentioned the influence of working mothers or mothers who became displaced homemakers either through death or divorce. From their mothers also emerged a strong theme of moral commitment to people, society, and to the larger world, perhaps the seeds for the generativity and leadership style seen in their present roles.

With respect to education twenty-one of the twenty-four had graduated from college, primarily in a liberal arts field; only two had a business administration degree. Twenty did graduate work with the majority of these having advanced degrees. In fact, when a graduate program was not completed, they explained that they had obtained the necessary skills from graduate work, and then did not worry about the necessary credential in order to do the job at hand. Thus, higher education became an important ingredient for them in their progress toward leadership positions. After undergraduate graduation, the majority then married, had children, put family needs above career needs, then came to their graduate work as adult learners. Two women interrupted undergraduate work, married, had children, then returned to complete a degree and go on to graduate school.

With respect to marriage, the rythms again showed much diversity, with several marrying in early twenties, but others plunging into a career and not marrying until thirty or past. Only four were not married (one was recently divorced). Sixteen had children, and the remaining four were women in their late thirties, wondering how to resolve their need for children and speaking poignantly of this. Biological timeclocks could be heard with the need apparently to marry by thirty, and to have children by forty. Marriages were described as strong, with husbands being supportive and encouraging of spouses' careers. All were two-career marriages, with the majority of husbands being professionals. It appears that, encouraged and mentored by fathers, they sought out equally supporting spouses.

Career aspirations: Many had been interested in mathematics, architecture, medicine, sciences, but had been discouraged from pursuing such careers by teachers and sometimes parents. However, they all spoke of a childhood in which they were encouraged to be independent, take risks, try out new roles, with the result that they felt a sense of mastery and competence. They excelled for the most part in high school, several being student leaders in a variety of settings (editor, cheerleader, manager of a team, president of student council, art scholarship, etc). Thus, the important roles of expectations and perceptions of ability to achieve are seen as important threads. A pattern emerged that of a bright, capable, energetic young girl with supportive encouraging ties to a father who at an early age was beginning to think and act in non-traditional female ways, with a sense of competence and mastery, and yet who upon entering college elected not science but the more traditional feminine studies. In fact, those who did become professionals (lawyers, professors, CPA's, and physician) came to these decisions some time after the traditional four year degree.

In career paths great diversity again was reported. Some, as stated earlier, married early, had children, and then began careers in earnest. Others worked, delayed marriage, then interrupted careers with maternal duties, working part-time until children were of school age. They came to their present position primarily through state government service, non-profit organizations, or politics. Three had been in politics as elected officials, all serving at one time in the Vermont Legislature, not on traditional "feminine" committees, but holding powerful positions in finance, banking, and appropriations. Only one (Governor's legal counsel) had had no previous state government or political experience but had been in the Peace Corps in the '60's. Thus, politics, government service, and non-profit service areas were important vehicles for these women's career paths.

Leadership styles: Women talked of their leadership styles in these terms: Looking at the big picture, asking, how will my program affect other departments, other constituents. Terms such as context, related, consensus, networking, listening to others were frequently used. Some thought that women leaders are criticized for listening to other perspectives, with critics not realizing that this style of leadership is information gathering and sharing. They talked about the lessened need for women to be ego-involved (in contrast to men), of women's ability to listen to other voices, and of by so doing giving others a sense of empowerment and ownership. However, many mentioned that one must also be tough when necessary. They felt that their experiences as wives and mothers had given them good management skills, but also a heightened appreciation of the responsibilies involved in running a state such as Vermont. They were concerned over managed growth, protection of children, women, minorities, resources, the land. They reiterated the need for good management, but with a strong values orientation, one with a vision of what they hoped Vermont could be in the year 2000.

Implications for the education of women

Over half of all college students today are twenty-two years of age or older, with women now outnumbering men. Thus, it is important as educators and administrators to consider gender differences as we train students for leadership. Fortunately, a more balanced view including the feminine

perspective is emerging in other disciplines; we must be sensitive to this new scholarship (Biklen & Dwyer,1986).

First, educators need to be sensitive to the needs of young women to try out new avenues, to dare, to risk, to be non-traditional. Opportunities need to be provided for women to polish, improve, remediate in areas such as mathematics and science. In today's technological society women as well as men need these skills. No longer is it acceptable to diminish a female's interest in non-traditional academic pursuits, such as mathematics, medicine, law. As Eccles (1986) points out, "educators must realize that academic course selection, career choice, attributional patterns, expectations for success are all influenced by gender role stereotyping (Eccles, 1986,p.19)." Therefore, successful intervention programs must be developed addressing psychological as well as structural barriers to women and achievement.

Secondly, women must realize that there is no one way to success; that women's paths to leadership can be non-linear, varied, with attention paid to personal as well as professional needs. One can return to unfinished work. There are myriad ways of balancing the professional/personal needs. One perhaps can have it all, but not all at once. Diligence and paying attention to the job at hand is essential, whether it is raising children or managing the state transportation business.

Third, we need to recognize and value "women's work" whether it is balancing the family checkbook, arranging day care, nursing the sick, volunteer work, school work. Women are learning through balancing of personal and professional needs an incredible amount of organizational skills which are easily transferable to another setting. Women also need to recognize that the world of work is exciting, challenging, but no more so than the role of nurturant. It takes energy, intelligence, perseverance, willingness to take risks, to step outside the conventional role without losing sensitivity and responsiveness for people.

Educators need to be aware of and to value women's ways of knowing, recognizing that women make sense of education, work, intimate relations in a contextual patterned, connected way. Furthermore, women, in their leadership roles, need to know that it is acceptable to be instrumental, active, strong, but that is is also acceptable to be sensitive, caring, compassionate, and responsive to the needs of themselves and others. Balancing the need for autonomy with the need for connections is possible and is occurring.

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